

Effective learning of civic skills: democratic schools succeed in nurturing the critical capacities of students

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In this paper, I discuss some research findings regarding the characteristics that democratic schools appear to have in common. These commonalities seem to have contributed to their status as being seen as reputable democratic schools. For the purposes of the reported study, schools that were diverse in their philosophical approaches to education and socio-economic composition were selected as case-study schools. A specific selection criterion was that these schools had a reputation for nurturing the critical capabilities of students with an explicit 'citizenship framework'. Students were not seen as 'objects to be acted upon', but rather were trusted to be subjects of rights and responsibilities within the school community in some form or other. The research included analysis of interview, observation and document data. Three major corresponding features were identified: (a) the principals perceived their schools to be 'out of the ordinary', (b) all four case-study sites had carefully developed school rules as statements of principles rather than an extensive list of dos and don'ts and (c) three of the four schools seemed to employ differential treatment practices rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the discipline of students. The findings suggest that it is possible for schools to educate effectively in and for democracy by way of day-to-day educational practices that inspire some aspects of political and moral student empowerment.

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Introduction

Is it possible to educate tomorrow's citizens to create a more democratic society without simultaneously democratizing the processes of education? How real are the

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experiences of students to practise the exercise of democratic decision-making at school? How are students encouraged to be active citizens of their school? It has been widely agreed that schools and teachers play an important role in preparing individuals for democratic citizenship (Kennedy, 2001; Kennedy *et al.*, 2001; Sachs, 2001). Schools and teachers provide one of the first opportunities to introduce children to democratic principles and practices. Primary school children may be encouraged to draw on their lived experiences when grappling with ideas of constructing their personal understanding of these rather abstract concepts.

A primary mandate of Australian education is believed to be the facilitation of students' understanding of the value of social justice and the rule of law. However, as issues of democracy and human rights are again gaining precedence, the debates about the nature and purpose of Australian education are resurfacing among politicians, educators and the general public. It is a sign of good health of our democratic system that various parties are renewing their focus on the future direction of society and democratic value development in Australian school children. In other words, the renewed urgency to foster democratic values in schools resurfaced in recent years as awareness increased about the general lack of democratic attitudes and understandings among Australia's youth. It also ignited the debate about the general nature and purpose of Australian education and its future direction.

In this paper, I argue that there is a greater need for awareness of the close relationship between two distinct although interrelated issues: the *education for democracy and human rights* on the one hand, and *democracy and human rights in education* on the other hand. These interrelated concepts are referred to here as 'education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights'. Focusing attention on the unique effects of educational principles and practices (democracy and human rights *in* education) enables the facilitation of political and moral literacy (education *for* democracy and human rights) as children's experiences are more closely associated with the abstract concepts of democracy and human rights. In other words, it is not enough to teach students about the Australian political system and expected moral and political obligations of Australian citizens. Educational practices such as the canvassing of student opinions on special issues or the operation of student councils in schools need to mirror the aims of specific curricula, while simultaneously ensuring rights to freedom of expression (CRC, Article 13), rights to freedom of association (CRC, Article 15) or rights to freedom of participation in decisions and exercising the right to be heard (CRC, Article 12) (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 2001).

Brief historical overview

A 1994 national civics survey found that there exists a 'widespread ignorance and misconception about the structure and function of Australia's system of government' (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 5). In the following years, the perceived lack of public understanding of democratic principles and practices has led the various Australian governments to allocate substantial monetary resources to remedy this problem. In June 1994 a Civics Expert Group (CEG) was established by the then Prime Minister

Paul Keating with the aim to 'recommend a non-partisan programme to enable all Australians to participate more fully and effectively in the civic life of our country and thereby promote good citizenship' (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 2).

The report by the Civics Expert Group (CEG), which was entitled: *Whereas the people ... Civics and Citizenship Education*,¹ suggested comprehensive curriculum materials. In 1995 some \$25 million was directed to support the CEG's recommendations, with the majority of funding targeted specifically for school initiatives. Further federal investments of \$31.6 million over eight years were made available by the successive Howard government to alleviate the problem of political illiteracy among young Australians. In 1998 a comprehensive civics and citizenship education programme called Discovering Democracy (DD) was launched that was based on the CEG's findings and recommendations. This new curriculum programme was seen as the answer to the problem of 'civic apathy' and a general lack of democratic attitudes and understandings among Australia's youth (Civics Expert Group, 1994). The renewed desire of the Australian government to motivate students to learn and understand the history and operation of the Australian democratic system of government and law is understandable and highly commendable (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

Although there seems to be widespread agreement on the value of democratic education (Civics Expert Group, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia, 1998a, b; Kennedy *et al.*, 2001), what a democratic education is and what strategies may preferably be used to facilitate the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship seems far from clear. Geoff Clayton, a primary school teacher, contends:

Call it what you will—'discovering democracy', 'active citizenship' or 'civics and citizenship education'—the fact of the matter is that in a lot of schools this area of study has not been actively addressed for some years. So how do we motivate students to learn about it, and teachers to include it in an already crowded curriculum? The answer to this question is compounded for many teachers because their students feel isolated from the democratic system of Australia (1999, p. 11)

Despite the current Federal Government's generous funding of more than \$31 million for a national civics and citizenship education programme, recent research (Erebus Consulting Group, 1999; Kennedy *et al.*, 2001) has shown that its effects may not have been as dramatic as anticipated. It may be time for a sea change. Schools are unable to educate tomorrow's citizens adequately in acquiring necessary attitudes and skills to function successfully and to appreciate the Australian democratic system of government without simultaneously democratizing schools themselves. Experiencing democracy and human rights in their schools on a sustainable basis, in a variety of situations and on a number of levels (whole school and classroom), may enable students more effectively to learn to value the meaning and advantages of the rule of law and open and fair decision-making processes within and outside school contexts than a new curriculum programme that has not been received as enthusiastically by teachers as initially envisioned. Learning about civic engagement entails an understanding of the nature and purpose of this engagement.

Thus, the focus of the reported study was on students' experiences of democracy in their day-to-day school life. My aim was to investigate in depth the issue of what

might constitute a democratic education both at a philosophical level and through empirical research. The research question of my project was as follows: how is the goal of educating students to be responsible citizens through democratic school practices achieved at a whole-school level, and at a classroom level in schools that are noted as places of explicit democratic practice?

There are some apparent limitations of the reported study. Given the relatively small sample size of the study, causal inferences cannot be drawn. There may be a number of public and private schools in Western Australia and elsewhere that employ explicit democratic educational principles and practices that were not part of this study, but would have been able to provide valuable case examples. A follow-up study that is based on a random sample of local schools will be needed to confirm some of the findings of the present study.

The search for democratic schools

Learning about democratic civic life and political engagement does not occur only in formal civics and citizenship education classes where students are invited to think about the relevance of concepts such as democracy and human rights. I contend that, instead of 'role-playing' parliamentary sittings and political decision-making on an abstract and often detached level, political engagement and civic learning can effectively be achieved through democratic educational practices in schools that model democratic attitudes. This means that a school's contexts and culture must be taken into consideration when proposing educational change. Educational innovations, such as the national initiative *Discovering Democracy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), which is a comprehensive programme complete with multi-media resources, are unable to take the social organization of specific schools and the everyday life of individual students and teachers into consideration.

It is within this framework that this research project considered the role of education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights in Western Australia. By focusing on schools in which a democratic pedagogy is preferred, the study investigated the effectiveness of their educational practices for the learning of civic engagement. Reflecting on and practising democratic attitudes, understandings and skills regularly in a number of different contexts will enhance the level of moral and political literacy in students. The study explored some aspects of democratic pedagogy that highlight the interconnectedness of the learning of engaged citizenship and everyday school and classroom pedagogy. It also analysed the significant similarities and differences that exist in school sites that were identified as places of explicit democratic practice. For this reason, the overriding concern when selecting target schools was to choose those that were practising 'active citizenship', in the sense that their students seem to have opportunities to practise civic rights and freedoms as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 12, 13 and 15) and thus are given some form of agency. Looking at the potential effect of pedagogy on the development of civic proficiency and democratic values is important, especially in the light of growing 'civic apathy' among young Australians.

The selection process

For the purposes of this study, schools that had a reputation as places of explicit democratic educational practices, which valued diversity and that were diverse in their philosophical approaches to education and socio-economic composition, were selected as 'model democratic schools'. The specific selection criterion was that these schools had a reputation for nurturing the critical capabilities of students within an explicit 'citizenship framework', where students were not seen as 'objects to be acted upon', but rather were trusted to be subjects of rights and responsibilities within the school community as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Social class and schools' SES scores

The Howard government recognizes that the socio-economic status of Australians is largely dependent on occupation and educational qualifications, inasmuch as it dictates a person's market power. In 1999 the Australian government introduced the 'SES index' (Kemp, 1999), which is a new approach to assessing a school's socio-economic status (SES). The SES index is used to establish the level of Commonwealth education funding per student and took effect in 2001 (Kemp, 1999). It assessed students' SES by connecting their addresses with current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data. The SES score of a school is established by indexing household income, education and occupation of parents and ranges from 85 to 130. Studies undertaken by the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) confirm the correlation between postal code, occupation and education dimensions of parents (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). The lower the school's SES rating, the less well educated and affluent is the parent base at a particular school. Equally, the higher a school's SES score, the better educated and more affluent is its parent base (Table 1).

School A, Abernethy Primary School,² is a small government school located in an underprivileged area of Perth, Western Australia, that is marked by high unemployment, a large ethnic community and related social problems. School B, Bolton Country School, is a medium-sized government school located approximately 200 km east of Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, with an SES score of 97. School C, Crystal Montessori School, is a small independent school located on the edge of a light industrial area of Perth. The parents are from a diverse ethnic background, relatively affluent and well educated. The school's SES score of 110 reflects this fact. School D, Deanmoor Independent School, is a small independent school located in one of the most affluent areas of Perth and the parents are mainly professionals, politicians and foreign business people. The school is 'rated as the second most affluent school in Western Australia with an SES score of 124', explained Debbi, principal of the school (principal interview, 13.11.00, School D).

Despite their philosophical and socio-economic differences, all the sites are known to be schools of explicit democratic practice. They present themselves as strong cultural settings that appear to be successful in cultivating a culture in which students,

Table 1: Summary of the differing characteristics of the four case-study schools

| School | Name* | Location | Type | Size | Social class | SES score |
|----------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|-----------|
| School A | Abernethy Primary School | Underprivileged area of Perth | Government school | Small to medium, approx. 260 students | Working class (mainly unskilled labour or unemployed) | 85 |
| School B | Bolton Country School | Country school, approx. 200 km inland from Perth | Government school | Medium, approx. 500 students | Marginal middle class (mainly manual occupations) | 97 |
| School C | Crystal Montessori School | Well-to-do area of Perth | Private and independent school | Small, approx. 130 students | Affluent middle class (non-manual occupations, mainly middle managerial positions) | 110 |
| School D | Deanmoor Independent School | Affluent area of Perth | Private and independent school | Small, no more than 100 students | Elite class (mainly upper managerial positions) | 124 |

*All names of schools and persons are pseudonyms.

parents and teachers feel that their basic human rights are respected and they are able to voice their concerns. Although it goes without saying that there exist stark differences among the educational practices of the four investigated schools, I was able to find some common characteristics that are shared among the schools. Moreover, the findings also suggest that there exists a relationship among social class, more democratic educational practices and students' ability to learn effectively about civic engagement and thus to significantly increase their proficiency rate of political (and moral) literacy. The finding about the interrelationship between economic wealth and capacity for civic engagement within the researched schools further problematizes the status quo. This study contributes to the number of recent studies (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Lloyd & Turale, 2001; Singh *et al.*, 2001) that are able to further our understanding of the processes of social and cultural reproduction in contemporary Australian primary schools overall. In that context, the identification of common features among this diverse group of schools is a significant finding and warrants explicit discussion.

The school cultures in comparison

Similarities

All four model schools were perceived to be open and friendly. They were generally lively, bustling places. The five principals' comments to two main interview questions are summarized in Table 2.

In the exploration of the responses of these five principals to two central questions pertaining to day-to-day educational principles and practices, it became apparent that

Table 2. Principals' comments in comparison

| School | Question: If you had to describe this school to a new child, what would you tell her/him about it? | Question: What about the rules, what are children allowed to do? |
|---------------|--|--|
| School A | A multicultural school. The right of reply. Some participation in resolving issues | School code of behaviour |
| School B | Very friendly, very caring | A charter of rights |
| School C*, P1 | Very friendly. The teachers are called by their first name | Four basic ideas |
| School C*, P2 | Very friendly. Children's classroom | Organic |
| School D | They will like it | A code of behaviour. There are only four rules |

*This school employed two principals (outgoing and incoming) during the course of the study. Both agreed to take part in the study and thus there are five principals overall taking part in the study.

there were striking similarities as well as differences between the way these schools were portrayed by the principals and how student bodies and minds seemed to be governed. Although there were identifiable differences, at this point, I am particularly interested in sharing the similarities among the four case-study schools as they pertained to the schools' cultural attributes and philosophical approaches.

Based on interview, observation and official school document data, I identified *three major corresponding features* at the four case-study schools. Firstly, the principals perceived their schools to be no 'ordinary' school; they saw their school to be distinctively different from traditional schools. Secondly, all four sites had carefully developed school rules as statements of principles rather than an extensive list of dos and don'ts. School rules as *statements of principles* were thus kept to a small number, usually no more than four rules. Thirdly, three of the four schools seemed to employ *differential treatment practices* rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the discipline of students.

No 'ordinary' school

All five principals perceived their schools to be distinctively different from traditional schooling. Therefore, they seemed to view themselves as an exceptional educational environment that could not be compared to 'ordinary' schools. The principals generally perceived their schools to be friendly and caring places where children 'are important' (School C), 'have a right to reply' (School A) and are respected as individuals with their personal histories and needs. These schools appeared to to be concerned, as principal Cathy explained:

always [to] look for the deeper aspects of the child and what is going on there, because there is always depth and each case is different. (Principal interview, 27.02.01, School C)

What apparently made these schools different in the eyes of the principals was a particular focus on children's rights to dignity and to participate in decision-making

processes, and authority figures' accessibility. As a consequence of promoting children's rights to dignity and fair treatment, the two public schools (School A and School B) had engaged in the process of seriously reviewing student behaviour policies operating at their schools and made some major adjustments to the school rules. For example, the 'resolution room' was scrapped in School A and the 'school bell' was abandoned in School B. Further, all four case-study schools appeared to have developed specific ways to increase students' awareness of the significance of 'rules' that inform the regulation of people's conduct within a community. Rules, as technologies of internal and external control, are vital to a functioning democratic community to uphold social order and ensure equality of rights and opportunity among the student body. Therefore, the development of a gradual understanding in students of the functioning of the schools' rules to enable the protection of people's rights was seen to be high on the agenda of the participating principals.

A particular aim was to focus on underlying values that find expression in school rules. The study found that, within the four case-study schools, there was a high regard for rules as functioning technologies that informed the vision of a democratically organized school community which does not necessarily mirror the social injustices of society or the local community. This is illustrated particularly well in School A, where a central aim of the principal was to model an internal social order where social justice was enforced, individual responsibility expected and basic human rights respected and protected.

In summary, the principals of the four schools shared the view that school rules, although often used to uphold hierarchies of control and surveillance, were valued differently in their respective schools. In the four case-study schools, school rules were important: they were seen and communicated as positive social technologies that structured daily school life in a way that was conducive to the formation (as in Schools A and B) and/or the preservation (as in Schools C and D) of a democratic social order within the schools, and where teachers and students could feel safe and knew that their rights and dignity were respected.

Statements of principles

All four case-study schools had deliberately developed a small number of school rules as statements of principles that informed the democratic order. These were used as guidelines to inform 'respectful conduct', which was seen as more effective than traditional school rules, more often than not drawn-out lists of rules that are to be followed by everybody equally and relics of the Enlightenment and the factory model of schooling. As Betty (School B), Debbie (School D) and Cathy (School C) noted:

- Betty: We sought to be realistic. There [are] a lot of things that come under 'respect'. So our rule is that everyone [has] respect for each other a very big part of a teacher programme is [to] be descriptive about what respect means. (Principal interview, 23.11.00, School B)

Debbie: We keep it [school rules] down to simple ideas ... so that the children start out with a simple understanding of the concept and then develop a more complex one as they go through [school]. (Principal interview, 13.11.00, School D)

Cathy: The whole notion of rules—they are not allowed to hurt other people and they are not allowed to be disrespectful of other people ... ‘We don’t like what you do, but we like you anyway’—you know, those sorts of comments to help other children ... to see that they could be empowering in helping someone to resolve something. (Principal interview, 27.02.01, School C)

These examples illustrate that the three principals believed that learning to understand and apply interpersonal concepts, such as ‘respect’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘equal rights’, is a slow and complex process. First, the children need to develop an understanding of what ‘respectful conduct’ might mean and that requires time, adequate modelling, practice and maturity. Further, the principals believed that the developmental process of acting respectfully may not be supported with an extensive list of dos and don’ts. Rather, as stated above, students in the case-study schools were invited to reflect on their beliefs and actions and gradually develop understandings of the ethical dimensions of purposeful and respectful conduct that connect the rights of others with their personal responsibilities.

Differential treatment of students

The schools’ philosophical approaches, which can loosely be described as social constructivist and child centred, allow the employment of socializing practices which are child and context dependent. Thus differential treatment of students and situations are common practice. Four of the five participating principals mentioned the significance of differential treatment for the benefit of all students. Alex observed:

Everyone is different ... I state that upfront to the child and the parents and that gets around this discipline issue where kids aren’t treated the same. So that’s day one, it’s made very clear to them that we treat students in different ways. (Principal interview, 14.11.00, School A)

Similarly, Carl explained that the children were not treated the same, and:

we say that upfront, to all the children at the school. (Principal interview, 7.08.02, School C)

Alex (School A), Debbie (School D) and Cathy (School C) provided explicit examples that are worth revisiting here to illustrate the significance of these situations for the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights.

Alex mentioned an incident where he would hesitate to suspend a child for breaking a window, if the child was an Aboriginal or Vietnamese student. Although the students may have had different reasons for their violence, as in the case of the Vietnamese student, the anger may be a cause of something that occurred at the school; whereas, in the case of the Aboriginal student, the anger often may not have had anything to do with the school. Instead of ‘simple rule-following’ and thus suspending a child for a serious infringement of school rules, Alex explained that he

would wait until the child cooled down and then work out what the issue was. Alex's explanation and reaction can be compared to a point made by Debbie in the rubber-throwing incident. Instead of punishing a student who kept throwing rubbers around the classroom to annoy the teacher and his fellow students, Debbie, the principal, decided to choose a different path and enquire about the needs of this student. Both of these principals were primarily concerned with the student's welfare and attempted to act in a way that took the best interest of the child as the primary consideration (Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Rather than focus on punitive measures and act with anger, for example: 'You know that you don't throw rubbers in school', the teacher asked: '*What is happening for you when you throw the rubber around the classroom?*' This question resulted in a lengthy discussion about the emotional upset felt by the student concerning some issues at home. Debbie (School D), as well as Alex (School A), strove to find the cause of unacceptable and antisocial behaviour. Debbie illustrated this by asking: 'Wait a minute, what's the problem?', while Alex explained:

Suspending an Aboriginal child for smashing the window when it's a big issue at home means sending them home again to the situation that's made them angry in the first place. So I wouldn't suspend them. (Principal interview, 14.11.01, School A)

In much the same way, Debbie contended:

So you're basically asking them for the reasons that they are doing something wrong and as often as possible the teacher will then negotiate what they should do. (Principal interview, 13.11.00, School D)

Hence, both principals seemed to agree that focusing on punitive measures and, for example, suspending the Aboriginal student or punishing the rubber-throwing student would not be in the best interest of that child. These principals, then, shared the view that punishing 'punishable' or antisocial behaviour may not necessarily aid in the development of safer and more considered behaviour on the part of both students.

Likewise, Cathy (School C) related a story where a child repeatedly stole stationery materials from other children. Rather than punishing the student, Cathy explained that she was committed to finding out what the cause of this unusual behaviour was:

We recognized that this was his way of saying: 'Hey, I'm really stuck. Something is going on in my life that I really don't like', and then we would be able to help him deal with that. (Principal interview, 27.02.01, School C)

These principals acknowledged that their practices were open to contestation, as Alex noted:

I know that this causes problems as far as consistency, but you know ... (Principal interview, 14.11.00, School A)

Nevertheless, they believed that these were practices that aided the personal development of these students. Hence, Cathy concluded that the experience of the stationery-stealing student was:

empowering for him ... so it will help him personally. (Principal interview, 27.02.00, School C)

The examples provided in this paper illustrate that these principals did not advocate that children's misbehaviour should go unpunished, rather they exemplified serious attempts that illustrated the shifting perceptions of children as bearers of rights and the corresponding responsibilities of adults to acknowledge this view of children and to adjust outdated principles and educational practices. The participating principals displayed an understanding of the status of children that recognized children's rights to dignity. Except for Betty, (School B), the principals noted that the children's personal contexts should be considered when trying to resolve the issue at hand; and they seemed to display a certainty that a 'one-size-fits-all', rule-bound approach to discipline and the consequential punishment (such as suspension) of disrespectful behaviours displayed in the above examples, would not necessarily be in the best interest of the students and may even exacerbate the problem. Considering the children's background and history, the principals devised different strategies to aid students' awareness of their responsibilities towards themselves and others in a democratically organized community.

Other children were undoubtedly affected to varying degrees by the above-mentioned incidents (window smashing, rubber throwing, stationery stealing) as they may have felt anguish and resentment towards the non-rule-abiding children who seemed to disrupt the social order of the school and who may not even have faced equal consequential treatment. Cathy explained:

It's a two-way thing. I didn't want [the offending child] to feel that he was a victim. ... Ownership without pointing fingers'. (principal interview, 27.02.01, School C)

A precondition for a school community as a functioning democracy, then, is a solid understanding that students as citizens with rights and responsibilities constitute a situated source of agency.

Changed child-image

Some of the commonalities among these four very different sites that seemed to have contributed to their status as being reputable, democratic schools were identified. The identification of common features among this diverse group of schools is a significant finding. The identified similarity is important in validating the hypothesis that everyday educational principles and practices that model democratic attitudes and skills are effective ways of teaching and learning democracy and human rights. One feature that was shared among the four schools was their view of themselves as being 'out of the ordinary' schools. They perceived themselves as progressive educational institutions where children's right to dignity was acknowledged. They shared in the belief that, in their respective schools, children's rights were observed to a greater extent than commonly understood to be the case in comparative educational settings. To this extent, the principals used their leadership position in all four case-study sites to reflect on governance issues within their schools. The re-evaluation of school rules and discipline procedures which at some of the schools resulted in the initiation of substantial adjustments, particularly in the two government schools (School A and

School B), is a reflection of the principal's child-image. This changed child-image, where students are not primarily seen as objects of control and correction, but instead as subjects of rights and responsibilities, is shared among all the five participating principals. This finding is central to an understanding of the importance of education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights as the value of democracy and human rights can only effectively be taught if genuinely experienced.

By granting students greater participation rights, they are not primarily perceived as objects of care and protection, but instead are recognized as social and political subjects with rights and responsibilities. Concluding from an analysis of the data, it seems that all five participating principals from the four schools share a similar child-image and genuinely believe that the students in their schools are enfranchised. This finding suggests that these schools embrace the notion of greater student participation in decision-making processes, as there no longer seems a need to exclude students from formal power. Further, the five principals appeared to believe that it is precisely this changed conception of children as social agents that sets them apart from other schools and makes them friendlier places. The changed conception of children enables the granting of participation rights to students in the ways practised in their schools. In other words, these principals argue that the way in which adults in their schools behave in relation to children is what makes the schools special and friendlier places: children's experiences are seemingly validated and the children are received with a respectfulness that has traditionally been denied to them. Moreover, the principals appear convinced that their investment in the development of a micro-cosmos of democracy, as practised in their schools, has overall positive effects for both the school culture and the individual student. They report that the educational implications of these democratic experiences and non-traditional policies and practices generally enhance communication, lower behavioural problems and lead to the development of social and political empowerment of students.

Understanding social justice and fairness

The principals from three of the four sites have purposely decided to mention to a prospective new student that the school is not necessarily treating all students equally, but rather as individuals with special needs, and would take their personal background and developmental stage into account. Another theme that emerges from the analysis of the commonalities shared among the four schools is that a progressive, liberal, child development model of education underlies all the school's policy guidelines. In this way, students' right to self-determination and participation in political processes at the whole-school and the classroom level seems dependent on their age and cognitive/emotional development.

At the same time, these findings indicate that even young students are encouraged to think through their understandings of social justice and fairness. The teaching and learning through lived experiences are prioritized as students' social realities are presented at three of the four schools as unique, complex and ambiguous, and as warranting differential consideration and actions. Why should it be fair that this

non-Caucasian girl or boy does not seem to be treated the same way as I am? This and similar questions may be fostering impressions that unequal powers in society do exist and are played out on a daily basis within and outside school contexts. Ethnic, class, gender, age and other forms of group dominance are not natural, but rather social constructs, which need to be interrogated, confronted and challenged. The struggle for equality of individual and collective rights, and of access and opportunity as a liberal democratic ideal, needs to be kept alive through local practices—as exemplified in the case-study schools which inform the development of attitudes, values and processes that are vital to a socially just and responsive community.

Conclusion: the move from rhetoric to reality

This study suggests that it is possible for schools to educate effectively *in* and *for* democracy by way of day-to-day educational practices that inspire some aspects of political and moral empowerment. Instead of simply implementing compulsory new civics and citizenship, human rights or multicultural education programmes, schools might start questioning what consensus there is in the local community/society concerning the notion of basic human rights for all. What is meant by the concepts ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’? What do we understand as the ‘basic’ human rights of school children? What are the attitudes and abilities that are thought of when we talk of human rights? Clarification of these issues would further people’s capacity for meaningful cooperation both to promote what is agreed upon and to pursue dialogue on issues of difference. Such processes can be highly empowering, especially for the underprivileged and marginalized.

It is not enough for (school) children to have internationally agreed-upon basic human rights; students indeed have a right to know that they have such rights and educators have a duty to ensure that students are adequately informed about their basic human rights inside and outside of school contexts. There are choices to be made, and it is up to the individual person to act according to his/her moral principles and to encourage those in power to do the same. This paper is a testimony to a growing effort in the struggle towards the democratization of schools and the development of the ‘good’ citizen. Social change efforts remain well within the grasp of individual schools. Democracy and human rights in contemporary Australian education is, then, not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued.

Notes

1. ‘Whereas the people ...’ are the beginning words of the Australian Constitution, acknowledging the democratic basis of the Australian governmental system.
2. All names of schools and persons are pseudonyms.

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